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Rehearsing the *éthnik*-jazz aesthetic: insights from practices with Athenian musicians¹

Ioannis Tsioulakis

Abstract: Academic analyses of music aesthetics often privilege the intellectual process of creating symbolic connections over the practical negotiation between performing musicians in a setting of rehearsal. In contrast, this article examines the way in which aesthetic elements (styles of improvisation, instrumental riffs, bass-lines, rhythm grooves, and so on) emerge as a result of power-struggles, personal rivalries, and competing stylistic sensibilities. Drawing on my research among ethnic-jazz music groups in Athens, who experimented with cross-overs between funk rhythms, Eastern-Mediterranean modal melodies, and jazz harmonisation, this essay will reveal how musical hybridity can become a contested terrain during rehearsals, creating social dramas of different magnitudes. The first part of the article examines ethnographic vignettes from rehearsals with Athenian musicians, while the second part analyses written testimonies from musicians on their perception of rehearsals and their role in collective music-making.

Keywords: jazz music; Greece; performance; power; ethnography.

Introduction

‘Wait, wait! Stop!’, Odysseas yelled. Everyone stopped playing. He looked at me with a frowned face, even a hint of disgust. ‘What chord was that?’ he asked impatiently. ‘E7, augmented 5th and 9th?’ I replied hesitantly. ‘Yes, but what voicing are you playing?’ he persisted. ‘Erm...’ I looked at my fingers still resting on the keys, ‘on my left hand...’

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‘That’s the problem!’ he interrupted. ‘No left hand, not down there anyway! You’re stepping on my toes, can’t you hear it?’.

This exchange of words during a rehearsal in 2001, long before I became an ethnomusicologist, has stayed with me through the years. I was 20 years old, the newest member in Vassilis Rakopoulos’ *éthnik-jazz* band, comprising four other men in their 40s and 50s. Odysseas, a Poland-born bass player, was acting as our self-selected arranger, often testing Vassilis’ patience given that it was the latter musician’s compositions that were being played and he was the one who booked all the performances to promote his solo album. Odysseas, however, through a combination of genuine skill, professional experience, and cosmopolitan flare (he was after all the only one among us born outside Greece), had managed to seize all authority in deciding who should play what. When it came to me, the somewhat inexperienced and evidently younger keyboard player, whose recruitment in the band seemed to be met by Odysseas with infinite puzzlement, his hegemony was absolute. The opening dialogue was not uncommon in tone or content, but I particularly recall learning two important lessons, none of which, unfortunately, was how to stand my ground: that band rehearsals are incomplete battles of authority, and that bass players despise keyboardists’ left hands.

Academic analyses of music aesthetics often privilege the intellectual process of creating symbolic connections over the practical negotiation between performing musicians in a setting of rehearsal.² Even when musicians describe the creative process behind their production to wider audiences, the mythological moment of spontaneous inspiration tends to prevail, further maintaining the illusion of the rehearsal as a smooth co-operation between musical geniuses.³ In contrast, this article will examine the way in which aesthetic elements (styles of improvisation, instrumental riffs, basslines, rhythm grooves, and so on) emerge as a result of power-struggles and competing stylistic sensibilities.

The ethnographic data for this article emerges from participatory experience and systematic field research among jazz-trained music groups in Athens since 2001. My focus is particularly on the so-called *éthnik-jazz* scene of the 2000s, which comprised musicians who experimented with crossovers between jazz-derived and ‘traditional’ musical idioms. Epitomised by ensembles such as

² See for example, Middleton (1990: 172-246) and Frith (1996). This strand of analysis has been productively criticised by Fabian Holt (2007).

³ W. Royal Stokes’ book *Living the Jazz Life* (2002) provides good examples of such testimonies from celebrated jazz musicians. Notable work that offers insider, ethnographic perspectives on how jazz musicians practice and create collectively has been offered by Paul Berliner (1994), Ingrid Monson (1996) and Richard Faulkner and Howard Becker (2009)

Iasis, *Mode Plagal*, and *Human Touch*, as well as solo artists including Armenian-born *oud* player Haig Yazdjian, guitarist Takis Barberis, and *ney* player Haris Lambrakis, this scene was defined by a fascination with musical fusions between Eastern-Mediterranean modal melodies, funk rhythms, and jazz harmonisation. A unique characteristic of the scene was that it sprung rather spontaneously from the ground up, based on the skill set of an emerging class of musicians who wanted to traverse boundaries between the small neo-traditional and jazz scenes, particularly in Athens. A typical *éthnik-jazz* band involved some musicians with a jazz/funk background (especially in the rhythm section), alongside soloists trained in traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean (particularly Greek, Turkish, Arabic, or Balkan musics), specialising in instruments such as *oud*, *ney*, *kanun*, *lyra* or percussion. These ensembles often performed and recorded new renditions of folk/traditional pieces, but also composed a wealthy range of new repertoire, which was specifically created to accommodate these fusions. This repertoire was characterised by a layering of sound aesthetics, where one would routinely hear melodies ornamented in Eastern-Mediterranean styles modally influenced by *maqams*, accompanied by extended jazz chords and funk rhythm patterns, and always including a good deal of improvisation.

In her monograph on the revivalist *paradosiaká* ('traditional') scene of urban Greece, Eleni Kalimopoulou has argued that '*éthnik*' is a term that often acquired a 'derogatory meaning [...] where traditional and contemporary idioms do not blend or are not well articulated' (2009: 171).⁴ Even though the term was also embraced as a positive affirmation of a contemporary 'blend' of different styles, Kallimopoulou correctly identifies the key issue of those musical collaborations: that they always found themselves aesthetically contested because of their eclecticism. As I have argued elsewhere (Tsioulakis, 2011), the *éthnik-jazz* scene was tantalised by debates of authenticity, where artists struggled to articulate the value of their music with reference to their personal experience, skill, and musical education, in order to counter the accusation of creating opportunistic or superficial mixtures. Progressively in the late 2000s, some exponents of the genre started substituting the generalised term *éthnik-jazz* with the more international label of 'world fusion'. Here, however, I maintain the more archaic term in order to highlight what I think is an important discrepancy between how 'world music' has developed and circulated in the West, and the way in which the small Greek urban scene of *éthnik-jazz* operated.

Much of the writings on music and globalisation have concentrated the phenomenon of 'world music'.⁵ The critique that has been often articulated – and which I will not reproduce here – is based on a fundamental premise: 'world music' circulation is reliant on an inequality of power

⁴ See also Kevin Dawe (1999) for a similar discussion of resistance to musical fusions among musicians in Crete.

⁵ See particularly Stokes (2004) and Frith (2000).

(Silverman, 2007; Guilbault 1997). Local, non-Western musics, the critical world-music narrative goes, are discovered by Western producers, and are marketed for Western audiences through a severe misrepresentation of their original meaning and, more importantly, an exploitation of the non-Western musicians involved. Thus, the critical arguments towards the ‘world music’ trend rest mainly on the assumption that the process involves western producers, western pop stars, third-world labourers, and western audiences-consumers (Hamm, 1989; Feld, 2000).

In contrast, in the relatively small music circuit of *éthnik-jazz* in Athens in the 2000s, large productions were almost unthinkable, popular stars were absent from the creative process, and the audience was less remote from the creators. Thus, the creative dynamics between the various musicians and entrepreneurs was considerably different. The emergence of the *éthnik-jazz* scene was a process dictated primarily by the musicians’ needs. One of the bands with whom I have collaborated at length is *Checkmate in Two Flats*, an assemblage of jazz and traditional musicians who drew on idioms from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. Their attitude towards eclecticism and fusion is evident in the description of the music making process during rehearsals by their vocalist, Sylða:

I remember the first rehearsal with Checkmate in two flats. I thought watching those guys was like watching different colours. So unique and different, and with every piece they made a little painting. Every painting was unrepeatable but it was not like random colours were thrown in together. There was a code; a code that made the sound distinctive and inimitable. It wasn’t like *lyra* and piano were just blended. There was a foundation that made all the difference. And this was being transformed in every rehearsal and every composition. (Sylða, private interview, 2006)

The ‘foundation’ to which Spyridoula refers is linked to the members’ backgrounds in music education, which are traversed by different yet compatible orientations. Ultimately, what we have is a rhetoric of creativity that starts from individuals and is completed through a collective effort. The instruments might be vehicles of tradition, and perhaps reminiscent of a former locality, but in the hands of educated musicians they are transformed into primary material for something new: an artwork that is created here and now, through the musicians’ co-existence in the rehearsal setting.

The essay that follows is divided into two parts. The first part will present two ethnographic ‘scenes’, revealing how the particular musical hybridity of the *éthnik-jazz* scene can become a contested terrain during rehearsals, creating consensual space or social dramas of different magnitudes. Adding to these ‘scenes’, the second part will examine a number of first-hand testimonies from musicians who unpack the nature and meaning of rehearsals in their musical

conduct, further revealing the role of power in this process. What particularly interests me is the incompleteness of these power-games. As will become apparent below, even though the rehearsal is often an exercise in producing consensus that will allow public performances to take shape, the antagonisms between band members are never settled. Rather, they are unfinished struggles over the recognition of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) that are momentarily abandoned for the sake of a performance in front of an audience, only to be picked up later. In that sense, I argue that rehearsals should be examined as performances in their own right, where subjectivities are being shaped and collectivities continuously emerge and collapse.

Qualifying rehearsal as a ‘performance’ should not need much argumentation. Even though an application of the terms as they are used colloquially among musicians might be misleading – a rehearsal is *not a performance* insofar as it is there to ensure the success of *an actual performance* that will follow – from an anthropological point of view it is hard to ignore the performative elements involved in rehearsals. Erving Goffman’s seminal definition of a performance as ‘all the activity of a given participant in a given occasion that serves to influence in any way any of the other participants’ (1959: 15), seems to actually apply to a rehearsal more fittingly than many formal performances, since the influence over other participants is immediately evident in the shaped outcome. Furthermore, rehearsals are terrains by design dedicated to the formation of ‘restored behaviour’, which, according to Richard Schechner (2002: 22), is intrinsically linked to the concept of performance.

In his very influential monograph *Music as Social Life* (2008), Thomas Turino elaborates on the difference between what he calls ‘presentational’ and ‘participatory’ performance, where the earlier is characterised by rigid divisions between performers and audiences while the latter welcomes more generalised and interactive participation. Within this dichotomy, rehearsals appear as ‘participatory performances’ *par excellence*, as settings that by definition require everyone’s participation and where the music is being shaped as a direct negotiation, however unequal, between all participants. In a recent article, jazz scholar Bruce Johnson challenges Turino’s dichotomy and proposes instead that we focus on ‘gesture’, as a process of cognitive importance in the development of what he calls ‘corporeal interactivity’ (Johnson, 2017). According to Johnson, this kind of interactivity emerges when cognition extends into ‘collective gesture, in which the audience/performer binary collapses.’ (ibid: 31) Again, rehearsal is a prime space for the examination of such ‘collective gestures’, where they become more explicit in their articulation without the fear of exposing the ‘back stage’ (Goffman, 1959) to the audience, and where we can witness how they directly shape an ensemble’s musical aesthetic.

With the above perspectives in mind, the next section will examine two rehearsal vignettes and trace the ways in which musical aesthetics and social relationships between co-performers are shaped within a nexus of musical and verbal ‘gestures’.

Part 1: Scenes of Rehearsal

Scene 1: Rehearsing with Haig Yazdjian

In April 2006, while I was conducting fieldwork for my MA dissertation, I was invited to join the band of Haig Yazdjian, a very prominent Armenian musician who has made a career in the past 20 years in Athens as a key exponent of the *ethnic-jazz* genre. Haig was adamant that in order to make good fusion music the contrasting elements must be thoroughly amalgamated together. Echoing most musicians with whom I have collaborated, he advocated that there is a thin line between ‘successful’ fusion and a ‘pot of random musical influences thrown together’ (Haig, private interview, 2006). For Haig, the definitive factor was that all the different elements have been filtered through his own musicality and aesthetics, emphasising the way in which multi-culturalism can be embodied in one person. Aware of the critical arguments against the commercialisation of ‘world music’, Haig made clear that what he did was decidedly different:

In Europe and America, world music is made by people coming from different places, and who are then united to produce something [...] I’m not a western star like Gabriel or Zawinul to need someone to come and play Arabic or Turkish music for me. I have *lived* most of these traditions, that’s the difference. (Haig, private interview, 2006)

Having religiously listened to all his albums in the late 90s and early 2000s, and previously performed numerous of his compositions with semi-professional ensembles, I joined the band with the confidence that I knew every chord, rhythm change, and sound texture that he could possibly be planning to play. Ten minutes in the first rehearsal, however, I knew I couldn’t have been more wrong. In contrast to the neat, calculated, almost dehumanised perfection of his recordings, Haig’s rehearsal was fluid and open-ended, with the pieces appearing as if they were being haphazardly made up on the spot. I embarrassingly remember protesting that ‘this is not how it is in the recording!’, and being treated with condescending smiles by the band after Haig confirmed that he was indeed aware.

It took me several hours of rehearsal with Haig’s band to understand the premise of communication and the role of ‘practising’. Recorded songs, which as Haig assured me were only one possible version of his compositions that worked well as an infinitely repeatable format, were

only a rough guide for practices, and by extension public performances. Admittedly, Haig's attitude in the recording studio was completely different. As I witnessed in a recording collaboration a few years following those rehearsals, Haig was keen to create recordings that were pristine, pitch-perfect, and almost inhumanly accurate. In the rehearsal context, however, the ensemble were not practising in order to standardise their parts; in fact the number of bars for each melody section, the tempos, the place of improvisations, and the rhythm patterns, never seemed to become fixed. Rehearsals were rather used as an exercise in improving communication: the longer musicians played together, the better they became at responding to each other's spontaneous musical shifts. Not all emerging ideas were successful or uncontested; I repeatedly witnessed innovations that were instantly abandoned as a result of another band member's disapproval – I still remember the bass player laughing out loud and yelling 'what's this *shit*?!' to the drummer who doubled the time during one of my keyboard solos. Still, the progression of rehearsals seemed to both expand the repertoire of grooves, textures, and dynamics that the band had in its collective repository and minimise the extent of verbal communication that was needed for these to be implemented. As the bass player of the band told me after one rehearsal: 'we've now reached the point where the drummer plays two beats of a new groove and I'm already with him on the bassline'.⁶

In his paradigm-defining 1987 article on 'participatory discrepancies', Charles Keil argues that '[m]usic, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be "out of time" and "out of tune."' (1987: 275). He suggests that this is accomplished through techniques of 'processual' (time-based) and 'textural' (pitch-related) participatory discrepancies that musicians in different cultural contexts develop and maintain. Keil further argues that ethnomusicologists need to develop a range of appropriate methods to understand the cultural particularities, production methods, and perception of those participatory discrepancies. The final question that he proposes to ask, is 'How are the mysteries of participation kept mysterious?' (ibid: 279). Here I argue that the answer is: through rehearsal. The recounting of the above scene serves to illustrate how pieces of music transform from recordings lacking in 'participatory discrepancies' into open-ended spaces of musical sharing, through the negotiation of a communicative framework in rehearsal.⁷ Even though this piece is then shared with diverse audiences in the context of a formal performance, its

⁶ In his examination of the Miles Davis Quartet in the mid-1960s, Christopher Smith suggests that responsive improvisation was accomplished within a similar creative setting, which he describes as a 'ritual space that took the participants out of their usual mode of perceiving, interpreting, and reacting' (1995: 43).

⁷ This is not to say that recordings do not feature other types of 'participatory discrepancies' as discussed by Keil. However, in the context of the Greek recording industry, where most digital recordings are a result of heavy mediation and multi-layered overdubbing, a process that prevents musicians from actually recording simultaneously, these 'participatory discrepancies' are more often simulated than a result of actual live interaction. For a discussion of recording aesthetics in Greek popular music, see Varelopoulos (2018).

‘mysteries of participation [are] kept mysterious’ insomuch as they are only *performed* with explicit gestures within the closed doors of the rehearsal space.

Scene 2: Arranging *Checkmate in Two Flats*

In December 2015, the band *Checkmate in Two Flats* with whom I have been collaborating since 1999, got together to rehearse for an upcoming performance. Since its members have been dispersed between different projects, work commitments, and even countries in the last few years, the band does not generally manage to rehearse or perform in public more than once or twice per year. This has given their get-togethers somewhat of a commemorative character, where everything is developed with constant reference to a shared past. Rehearsals, thus, serve a dual purpose of practising – which includes remembering parts but also updating some of the programme and arrangements – and reminiscing about the 2000s, when the musicians (then in their 20s) were more dedicated and enthusiastic about the common project. In our effort to refresh the programme, that evening we started listening to an old rough recording of revamps of traditional tunes. The nostalgic feeling was soon replaced by a slight embarrassment which turned into laughter. ‘Wow, we did *not* hold back’, Petros, the bassist, said. ‘No, everything we knew went in there!’ I responded. The pieces moved from odd bars of 7/8 to swing and from funk grooves back to ‘traditional’ rhythms, while the embellished *maqam*-based melodies were accompanied by dissonant extended chords on the bass and piano. When one tune suddenly changed to a reggae beat everyone burst out laughing. ‘How immature!’, Kostis, the drummer, said.

The rest of the rehearsal progressed towards finding more ‘mature’, or ‘current’ ways of arranging some of those pieces. They needed to be more ‘minimalistic’, keeping a more coherent aesthetic throughout, rather than showcasing all the different styles in which the band is comfortable playing. This, however, did not develop entirely without friction. Proving that he or she is ‘up to date’ with ‘current’ styles of arrangement requires a musician to often confront his or her bandmates. This happens between, but also during runs of rehearsed pieces of music, through words, bodily gestures, and facial expressions, all of which are constantly interpreted and responded to in the course of a rehearsal. Paul Berliner has analysed this process in US jazz practices, whereby ‘musicians explore various ways of rendering pieces throughout rehearsals, starting and stopping their performances at whim, and evaluating the outcomes.’ (1994: 306). Eventually, he argues, ‘in a give-and-take process, they settle on those that are mutually satisfactory and incorporate the most successful elements into the evolving designs of arrangements.’ (ibid). On the instance of my rehearsal vignette, some proposals were met with

consensus, for example the bassist's idea that we need 'less kicks and accents' in the arrangement, an element that everyone agreed was 'quite old-fashioned'. Disagreement, however, developed with regards to the use of improvisation: some argued that long solos are a remnant of our jazz-fusion past which we need to let go, while others maintained that allowing space for improvisation is necessary to distinguish our style from 'commercial' popular music. In the end, some space for improvisation was granted and some of the pieces that could not be successfully 'updated' to a contemporary aesthetic without losing their original purpose were discarded altogether.

Even though usually band disagreements during rehearsal are settled through some sort of compromise, especially when there is an upcoming public performance, the disputes are far from forgotten. Feelings of antagonism are particularly durable when they connect to aesthetics. Being criticised about their taste or appreciation of stylistic nuance is not something that musicians with whom I collaborated treated lightly. Within the band microcosm, where banter allows for the worst imaginable slang and cursing between members to go practically unnoticed, having your playing style called 'outdated' or 'passé' is a terrible insult. As a result, power struggles in rehearsals tend to remain *incomplete*. Compromises are made along the way that shape temporarily fixed outcomes to be presented in an upcoming formal performance, but these are merely snapshots of an overarching negotiation between co-existing subjectivities on a longer journey. In that sense, rehearsals resemble Victor Turner's 'social dramas', which always include some sort of 'redressive action' with the aim of 'reintegration' (Turner, 1987: 75-77). However, as Turner eloquently argues:

At every moment, and especially in the redressal of crises, the meaning of the past is assessed by reference to the present and, of the present by reference to the past; the resultant 'meaningful' decision modifies the group's orientation to or even plans for the future, and these in turn react upon its evaluation of the past. Thus the apprehension of the meaning of life is always relative, and involved in perpetual change. (ibid: 98)

I thus argue that rehearsals are the field where this 'perpetual change' takes place both in its musical and its social manifestation, while a public performance is the exceptional moment when social dramas are temporarily put aside for the audience's sake. This is not to say that public performances are completely rid of power struggles; on the contrary, these antagonisms are deeply felt on stage (and perhaps by audiences) while bands switch to 'presentational performance' mode. However, it is in rehearsals that personalities and social dynamics play out in an explicit way that profoundly shapes the aesthetics of the created music.

Part 2: Reflexive Testimonies

This part will examine in turn five testimonies from musicians involved in the Athenian *éthnik-jazz* scene, all in their mid-30s, focusing on the practical purpose, musical value, and social circumstances of rehearsals. The extracts below are from written communication, which explains the coherent and confident articulation, but they each concern different aspects of rehearsal dynamics showing the multiplicity of experiences that individuals draw from this process. To some extent these extracts are contradictory, a fact that reminds us that verbal testimonies are not mere accounts of facts, but rather representations rich in intention, positionality, and power. (Hall, 1997: 41-51) All the quoted musicians were asked to write a short reflection on the role of rehearsal in their musical lives, and were left free to be as empirical or theoretical as they wished. Below I quote their whole responses, translated but as unedited as possible.

Testimony 1: Yiannis

Rehearsal. I prefer the term 'preparation'. It is perhaps the most creative, orgasmic, and liberating moment for those who participate in the performing arts. With one note: I don't mean the dress rehearsal before a show, doing a run of the songs, or adding the last details (even though this is also useful for the final result). On the contrary, I mean the moments of sharing, the making of aesthetic, the ideological cooperation of the musicians. The moments when ideas are tested against the existing material, when there are no limitations apart from individual dexterity and knowledge. This is when the 'raw dough' is created between musicians, where their style of arrangement and compositional perspective are shaped, along with their improvisational freedoms. What's more, their common perception of life, reality, and their ideology are created there. This is the only place where band members can fully realise their natural talent; only in an ensemble. Who has the ability to articulate a charming melody, whose taste will introduce an interesting arrangement, which aesthetic proposition is the most solid one, all this, the whole attraction of musical coexistence materialises in the rehearsal and then becomes tested on stage. It is in rehearsals that we learned music, the music beyond the notes, the music that is made by people for other people. Without this rehearsal, the internal and external preparation, music cannot be elevated into a major social event, but rather it remains an exposition of virtuosity. It is the sharing in rehearsals that turns an instrumentalist into a musician.

Yiannis is a male guitar player who has played a range of musics, from Greek urban folk music (*rebétiko*) to American blues and psychedelic rock. He is also a trained philologist, specialising in Marxist literary criticism. Perhaps not unfittingly for his dual identity, he emphasises the ‘ideological’ dimension of rehearsal practice. In Yiannis’s account, ideology is explicitly mentioned as part of the shaped subjectivities of the participants, but is also subtly linked to the intended result: ‘music that is made by people for other people’. In other words, rehearsal becomes the core of an ideal music-making that is deeply humanistic, as opposed to a stand-alone alienating product.⁸ Furthermore, rehearsal is a space where musicians ‘learn’ in a profound way, ‘the music beyond the notes’, or as Tim Rice argues the music that is ‘learned but not taught’ (2003: 77). In her in-depth analysis of improvisation as collective interaction, Ingrid Monson (1996) has dedicated extended passages to explaining how musical roles in jazz ensembles are negotiated through collaboration. She writes: ‘The shape, timbral color, and intensity of the journey is at every point shaped by the interacting musical personalities of band members, who take into consideration the roles expected of their musical instruments within the group.’ (Monson, 1996: 26) In his testimony above, Yiannis argues that this happens in rehearsals, where ‘improvisational freedoms’ are explored and negotiated. In contrast, the stage is where music is ‘tested’, the brief moment where musicians can receive feedback on their work from audiences, only to continue this malleable creative process within further rehearsals.

Testimony 2: Dimitris

If you noted the three most frequent words in a musician’s vocabulary, they would be ‘rehearsal’, ‘concert’, and ‘recording’. And this is not in random order. An average musician in Greece divides their professional time between those three activities, not equally but prioritised as above.

I view rehearsal as a form of sociality. It is a procedure where you establish the relationship that you will have with other musicians (no matter if it is a good or a bad one) while shaping the context for this relationship to impact on the music material itself. This is ultimately a procedure that could be conducive to everything or nothing.

I am still unsure if what becomes perfected in a rehearsal is the music itself or the communication between musicians. I think this varies between different occasions. What is for certain is that during those hours that we spend together, we have the opportunity both to create and to reject, to test our

⁸ This could be read within a discourse of authenticity which resists types of mediation that are perceived as threatening to truly communal music-making (see Johnson, 2017; Tsioulakis, 2013; Auslander, 2008: 62-72).

sound, our abilities, to write down our ideas but also give each other homework. So in a sense, rehearsal is also the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ of a meeting.

Our experience with Checkmate in Two Flats showed that a band can actually survive by engaging more in rehearsals and live performances than recordings. At times it felt as if we were the main audience of our own music. That was a challenge for commercial success, but it also contributed to a strong bond and to unbreakable intersubjective and musical relationships.

Dimitris is a male composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist who specialises in the Greek island lute, guitar, and *bouzouki*. He has been involved in various Athenian musical scenes, but most prominently in *éthnik-jazz* (an establishing member of the band *Checkmate in Two Flats*) and the more mainstream singer-songwriter scene of *éntechno*.⁹ He is also a trained ethnomusicologist. In his testimony, Dimitris emphasises that rehearsal is the first priority for professional musicians. This is not only because it is their most frequent activity, but also because it is necessary for ‘shaping the context’ for all musical creativity, making all the difference between ‘everything or nothing’. However, he also makes an effort to expand the concept of rehearsal to include ‘the before and the after’, alerting us to the kinds of preparation and reflection (‘homework’) with which musicians engage as a prerequisite and a result of rehearsing. Finally, he comments on our common endeavour in *Checkmate in Two Flats*, where long and intense rehearsals meant that band members often operated as the primary audiences of the music being created. This further challenges understandings of rehearsal as a means to end, and elevates the exchange that takes place into a performance in its own right.

Testimony 3: Sylða

Rehearsal is the shaping of a largely homosocial love-nest, with usually more than two lovers.

*I think there are mainly two kinds of ensembles, this might sound like an overgeneralisation but I think there are few grey areas in the Greek scene. There are the ‘collaborative’ ensembles, where everything is co-produced. These ensembles usually have a short lifespan, unless the members madly love each other but ‘sleep in different bedrooms’, or live in different countries as is the case with *Checkmate in Two Flats*. The second kind is the one dominated by a leader who is usually the*

⁹ For a discussion of *éntechno* see Fabbri & Tsioulakis (2016).

arranger. In this setting things are clearer, so the longevity of the group – if not its success – depends on the leader's abilities.

So, rehearsals are where hierarchies are negotiated, sometimes even challenging the 'official' hierarchies as they might be designated by the type of ensemble. This is where people decide if they like or dislike, complement or contradict each other. It is like a long rite of passage, with different stages and challenges. Furthermore, even when they have the best of intentions, members act like male peacocks who have to claim their power by exposing their colours. Let's not kid ourselves, a rehearsal is a war of sorts, where you have to be constantly alert in order to combat against or alongside your co-fighters, rather than with the audience of a random venue. It is with those musicians that you go to war, not with the civilians.

Sylða is the female singer of *Checkmate in Two Flats* and numerous other *étnik-jazz* and neo-traditional groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as the only female musician in most of the groups that she participates, she brings up the issue of masculinity in rehearsals. Within ensembles, Sylða argues, hierarchies are under constant negotiation, and rehearsals are the spaces where this struggle becomes explicit often in profoundly gendered ways.¹⁰ She goes as far as to use a war metaphor, where male fighters can become comrades or enemies depending on the outcome of a challenging rite of passage. However, this 'war' again only takes place in rehearsals, when the audience, mere 'civilians' in this metaphor, are out of harm's way. In her dichotomy between 'collaborative' groups and those defined by a 'leader', Sylða goes one step further, identifying a qualitative difference between structures of collaboration where members can equally shape the outcome, as opposed to those where their input is limited to performing preassigned parts.¹¹ But in the context of a rehearsal, even those structures can be subverted, she argues, a further testimony to the centrality of the rehearsal practice as a terrain for battles of power.

Testimony 4: Alexandros

You're asking me in a period when I am really sick of rehearsals. Currently I perform with more than four different groups. Judging from the results, I can't say that the best performances that I have

¹⁰ For a discussion of masculinity and control in Greek folk/traditional music, see Dawe (1996).

¹¹ Berliner has also identified this difference between types of leadership among US jazz groups. He writes: 'When leaders appreciate the peculiarities of instruments and share a technical musical language with the band members, they can communicate their ideas easily and directly. [...] As often as not, however, leaders have flexible views on repertory and arrangements, and they invite other members to contribute favoured standards or their own works to the band's repertory, and assist in arranging them.' (1994: 304)

given were due to the number or quality of rehearsals. What I remember as the best gigs are the ones that had a good atmosphere, concentration, and no anxiety or stress.

I am not trying to devalue the concept of rehearsal, since it has played a big role in my musical development, but I do think that a common aesthetic, common educational background, reliability and efficiency, mutual respect, and seriousness are far more important than rehearsing. The quality of a band (and I base this on a 16-year-long experience with different ensembles) relies on a good assemblage of members, lots of discussion and socialisation, and frequent performances. It is important to designate specific roles and solve aesthetical issues from the outset.

Alexandros is a male guitarist, lute and *oud* player, singer and composer who makes a living as a session musician and an educator. He has extensive recording and performing experience and a very diverse education including Western art and Mediterranean folk traditions. Alexandros offers the sole testimony that seeks to underplay the significance of rehearsals and bring back the focus on performances in front of an audience. In this effort, he treats the question of the importance of rehearsal as one of ‘efficiency’ with regards to assessable ‘results’. According to his view, rehearsals cannot shape a good ‘assemblage’ of members, or compensate for the absence of a pre-calibrated aesthetic based on uniform backgrounds and intentions. This perspective cannot be seen outside of his particular professional circumstances, where a demanding schedule and multiplicity of commitments require aesthetic issues to be ‘solved’ early, rather than to be shaped through long-term interaction. Alexandros’ preference for ‘frequent performances’, then, reveals his preference for the presentational aspect of music-making, where pleasure is achieved through the communication to audiences, and where music shines in its most polished version.

Testimony 5: Kostis

The process and significance of rehearsal depends on the genre of music. In ‘éthnik’ and jazz music ensembles that I have participated, I often had to expand beyond my typical duties as an instrumentalist and also fulfil compositional roles. Given that those ensembles work without (or with very minimal) scores, a musician is called upon to contribute to the composition, the arrangement, and the wider creative process. In contrast, my role in an ensemble of contemporary or earlier art music is typically more confined in terms of creativity, but more demanding in terms of virtuosity and technique.

A more problematic type of rehearsal in my experience, is when a popular music ensemble comprises musicians with unequal degrees of responsibility, and not everyone is allowed the same creativity or say in the guidance of the group. This is particularly troubling when, in contrast with an art music ensemble, no one has the official title (or often the justifying qualifications) of the leader. This results in frictions regarding creativity, aesthetic, and leadership itself.

Kostis is a composer, keyboardist and drummer who, alongside *éthnik-jazz* and other popular music ensembles, also participates in contemporary art-music scenes. His response stresses the role of rehearsals of popular music in actually shaping the musical text, with each instrumentalist directly involved in the creative process. This characteristic renders ‘unequal’ popular music ensembles problematic, since the stifled creativity of individual members does not allow for the necessary communicative space to emerge. Within this context, leadership disputes are additionally troubling due to the fact that musicians cannot claim official ‘qualifications’ – what Bourdieu would call ‘institutionalised cultural capital’ (1986: 47) – as a proof of legitimacy. Hence, as I argued earlier, battles of authority within such rehearsals tend to remain eternally incomplete.

The above testimonies are as evocative as they are irreconcilable. The common narrative of negotiating authority and power in rehearsals is not welcomed by all the musicians to the same degree. Idealistic accounts of creativity stumble upon frustration over inequality, or even become threatened by the collapse of collectivities entirely. This reveals a wider issue of shared and unshared values, which relates to the intersubjective experience of making music as a collective. As anthropologist Alessandro Duranti explains, one key essence of intersubjectivity is ‘[t]he being-with of specific encounters, interactions, joint activities, in the present as well as in the remembered past and in the anticipated future’ (2010: 27). This makes rehearsals intersubjective realms *par excellence*, but does not necessarily make them pleasurable. Intense battles as they appear to be, rehearsals are experienced unequally by members, filtered through their positions, and mediated by their relative power, their cultural capital, their gendered identity, and their aesthetic preferences. To take the testimonies above seriously means to engage with the infinite and incomplete meanings of the rehearsal space, and to embrace its creative as well as devastating potential over collective music-making.

Conclusions

Rehearsals have been a ubiquitous practice among musicians across different art, folk and popular music cultures. However, due to a combination of musicians' public rhetoric and musicologists' lack of access to the rehearsal space, this practice has been largely seen as subservient to a more paramount musical phenomenon: the public performance. The ethnographic descriptions and first-hand testimonies in this article have attempted to show that rehearsals are actually denser and more explicit spaces of negotiation than performances on stage, and that they impact profoundly on both the aesthetics of the music culture and the social dynamics of the musicians involved. More specifically, I have examined the ways in which musicians of the so-called *éthnik-jazz* scene in Athens, especially around the peak of the genre in the early 2000s, negotiated their hybrid aesthetic through debates around improvisation, rhythm, and arrangement styles, in ways which evoked deeper divisions of authority. Ultimately, these case studies reveal that rehearsals are incomplete power struggles which lay down temporary outcomes to be presented in public, only to depart again for a longer journey whereby musicians discover the limits of their social and artistic cooperation.

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